INTRODUCTION

A goal of the *International Journal of Knowledge Management* is to build and develop the knowledge management (KM) discipline and community. Previous issues of the journal have provided overviews of the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS) and the Americas Conference of the Association of Information Systems (AMCIS) KM tracks. This was continued by looking at KM in Australia with an overview of the Australian Conference on Knowledge Management and Intelligent Decision Support (ACKMIDS). This article is the journal’s first that looks at KM in a non-English speaking venue, specifically Tunis, Tunisia. Additionally, this article looks at KM outside of the traditional technological regions of the world and at an area, North Africa, that has not been discussed much. The 6th International Information Forum was hosted by the University of Tunis Carthage April 25-27, 2006 with a focus on KM. The rest of the article describes the community and conference. Future issues of the journal will contain articles from the articles presented at the conference.

The University of Tunis Carthage, UTC, is one of seventeen private Universities in Tunisia. It educates highly selected Tunisian students and is emerging as one of the key driving forces of Tunisian transformation by preparing the next generation of business leaders, architects and information systems professionals. Since 1995, the University has been organizing short forums to discuss topics relevant to Tunisian higher education, business and governmental policies. Topics have ranged from human resources, information systems and computer science, multimedia, organizational performance and enterprise productivity. In 2006, the University hosted an overview forum on the status of KM as a discipline and how KM could help Tunisian society. The forum consisted of a 3-day series of presentations and panel discussions from a number of academic and industry experts.

KM was chosen as a key interest area for the local community in Tunisia following the November 2005 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS, 2005) meetings (also held in Tunis). In a country that is rapidly leveraging information and communication technologies (ITU, 2006), the UTC community felt that understanding strategies to utilize, store, create and manage the large amount of information and knowledge exchanged through advanced mobile and broadband communication technologies was a key prerequisite for a successful transition.
to a knowledge economy. As later described, the forum was able to attract a diverse audience of participants and broadened perspectives on the future of KM in Tunisia.

**TUNISIA: A COUNTRY IN TRANSITION**

Looking at its sustained growth in the area of knowledge management, Tunisia can be considered a country transitioning towards an increasingly connected and competitive society. While more needs to be done, Tunisia’s recent positioning and attention to fundamental macro-economic variables recognized as relevant to knowledge growth in various frameworks (World Bank Institute, 2005; OECD, 2003; UNCDAT, 2003) is increasing (Figure 1). One such framework (World Bank Institute, 2005) measures a country relative position on KM through the use of the Knowledge Economy Index (KEI). KEI is defined as the average of the performance scores of a country in the four pillars of a “knowledge economy” (Dahlman & Andersson, 2000). The pillars include aggregate variables representing Economic Incentives Regime, Education, Innovation, and Information Communications and Technology constructs. Compared to a number of neighboring and global economies, Tunisia’s position on the KEI index shows a significant increase from 1995 data. According to World Bank data, while other North African countries such as Morocco and Egypt have maintained stable and consistent KEI profiles, in the last decade Tunisia has increased its KEI index and surpassed Egypt’s levels. This growth is the first step towards a better global positioning and creating a knowledge economy.

While Egypt and Morocco maintained their 1995 relative rankings (based on rank ordering of the 128 countries benchmarked in the March 2006 KAM analysis), Tunisia shows improvements. More specifically, this recent growth is driven by increases in the “Innovation” and “Information Infrastructure” components of the Knowledge Economy Index (Figure 2). Tunisia made substantial progress in innovation and knowledge creation (represented by variables such as the number of researchers in R&D, scientific and technical journal articles published and patent applications granted by the United States Patent Office) as well as the overall penetration of telephones, computers and the Internet.

Nevertheless, compared to neighboring benchmarked Egypt, Tunisia needs to pay additional attention to variables related to education (Figure 3). Secondary and tertiary enrollment variables — the gross overall total enrollment for a specific age group (secondary and tertiary) compared to the total population in that age group — are low, particularly in the number of people who decide to pursue college degrees.

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It is beyond the scope of this review to identify specific gap areas and/or policy initiatives or further investigate specific macro-economic drivers that may impact Tunisia’s transition. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the types of knowledge sharing efforts yearly organized by the UTC Forum (described next) and the contribution that the university is bringing to tertiary education through a strong and articulated curriculum are critical elements that show educational efforts headed in the right direction.

**THE 2006 KM FORUM ORGANIZATION**

The KM forum was held in Tunis on April 25-27, 2006. Its objectives were to discuss state of the art issues in KM, while providing a general overview of the topic and discipline (Jennex & Croasdell, 2005) within the context of information systems and human resources strategies for the enterprise. Key discussion questions and goals were (a) how KM supports organizational change; (b) key tools and processes that drive the implementation of a KM projects in organizations; (c) long term organizational impact; and finally, (d) which other areas are relevant and interconnected to KM programs.

To better leverage one of the key promises of a KM system — that of providing the right information and knowledge to the seeker and/or
Figure 1. Knowledge Economy Index

Source: Interactive Knowledge Assessment Web site, 2006

Figure 2. Diamond diagram comparisons on KEI indicators (Tunisia; Egypt)

Source: Interactive Knowledge Assessment Web site, 2006

Figure 3. Knowledge assessment scorecard variables (Tunisia; Egypt)

Source: Interactive Knowledge Assessment Web site, 2006
user when needed or requested — the forum started with an analysis and understanding of the needs of the audience. A discussion panel introduced the forum with a brief overview of the agenda and a semi-structured discussion of key questions and issues from the audience. Like many other North African citizens, Tunisians are versatile in multiple languages and disciplines and are a demanding audience concerned with finding solutions to very specific organizational problems as well as identifying and critiquing the theoretical underpinning of various concepts. These characteristics made the discussion as interactive and constructive as in the spirit of the discipline being presented.

The invited papers covered several aspects of KM:

Jean-Louis Ermine, from the Paris Institute of Telecommunications, discussed theoretical KM underpinnings with a case-based introduction of KM organizational experiences including the KM unit and projects at CEA, the French Center for Nuclear Energy; at AIEA, the International Agency for Atomic energy, a group concerned with lessons learned replication across the world; and at CEFRIO, a Quebec-based liaison and knowledge transfer partnership among 160 university, industrial and governmental members. His discussion highlighted the relationships between KM and decision making in organizations. Ermine also presented a roadmap for the definition and maintenance of an organizational knowledge map (“cartographie”), a preliminary step for the understanding of enterprise competencies and gap areas.

Murray E. Jennex and Denis Meingan presented two complementary perspectives on knowledge management tools. Jennex, Associate Professor at San Diego State University-U.S., introduced technologies within the context of KM theories, practices, and a KM success model, highlighting a link between knowledge, organizational memory and organizational learning (Jennex, Croasdell, Olfman, & Morrison, 2005). Knowledge repositories, data warehouses, portal, communication, and other knowledge creation tools were all presented as supporting components of organization knowledge, learning and memory rather than the sole technical drivers of knowledge processes. Cases from the retail industry, hotel and help desk units illustrated successful and less successful applications.

Denis Meingan, associate director of Knowledge Consult-France, focused on the articulation, classification, ranking and selection of state-of-the-art knowledge management tools available in today’s market (both proprietary and open-source applications). His discussion phased the evolution of the tools and enabled understanding drivers and selection procedures (as well as investment strategies) in specific application areas.

Laura Garcia Vitoria and André Jean-Marc Loechel, University of Grenoble-France, both presented perspectives on the localization aspects of knowledge management, with a particular focus on the regional-counties-cities networks. They argued that knowledge management efforts cannot be separated from the context where they occur, and described several examples of European Union sponsored efforts to increase the development, information and communication technology and research infrastructure at the township level.

Olfa Nasraoui, University of Louisville-U.S., presented trends in data management and mining applied to knowledge discovery in databases. Her presentation covered rules, processes, tools and techniques for the classification, grouping and extraction of data, information and knowledge from large warehouses. Examples from multiple industries, particularly banking, health and retail, enabled the direct
application of theoretical and technical knowledge.

Katia Passerini, New Jersey Institute of Technology-U.S., introduced methods and tools for knowledge assessment at the organizational and national levels. At the organization level, knowledge assessments are described as inherently embedded with the definition and measurement of intellectual assets. At the national level, measures of a country endowment and implications for knowledge creation are linked to macro-economic measures combined into scorecards.

Alain Spalanzani, Université Pierre Mendès-France, linked total quality management (TQM) to the evolution and experiences in knowledge management. He created a historical link between total quality theories and research and the Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1995) SECI model (socialization, externalization, combination and internalization) by highlighting how both TQM and KM are designed to help organizations improve their behaviors, make better decisions, and provide continuous learning and improvement in processes and outputs.

PARTICIPANTS DISTRIBUTION

Overall, the forum covered multiple perspectives on the management of knowledge in diverse organizations. The papers addressed the theory and practice of knowledge management, with a distinctive focus on two complementary perspectives (Francophone and Anglo-Saxon). Conference participants captured the nuances of the approaches and were able to integrate the discussion within the local environmental settings and needs of their specific organizations. These participants represented a large variety of sectors (banking and finance, environmental resources, education, etc.) and belonged to academic, business and governmental organizations with a higher prevalence of academic and research participants. Their distribution breakdown is presented in Figure 4.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE FORUMS

North Africa is experiencing a rapid growth in information and communication technologies deployment. Recent International Telecommunications Union analyses (ITU, 2006) exhibit Africa as the continent with the highest mobile penetration annual growth rate in the world (since 2000). Several Northern
African countries are increasingly implementing public sector development and transformations through strategic e-government initiatives (Kamel, 2006). Additionally, while we have compared Tunisia favorably to Egypt, it should be noted that Egypt is a good example of KM in North Africa having members on this journal’s editorial review board and articles published in this journal on KM in Egypt. Also, Egypt has hosted its own conferences on KM such as the 2004 Conference on Information Science Technology and Management held at the Great Library in Alexandria.

The educational discussion and seminars organized by UTC are just one example of the fervid attention of the community of key stakeholders and their commitment to helping African growth. These discussions will continue and expand the visibility of UTC within and beyond the Tunisian economy. Plans for 2007 include a discussion of broadband wireless and security trends, another crucial focus area that may help the country leapfrog into an increasingly important player of the knowledge economy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all the speakers, organizers and staff who made the 2006 UTC Forum a success. Sincere thanks also to the conference participants who challenged the speakers with stimulating and precise questions, raising the interaction level and interest of the discussion. Lastly, sincere thanks to Karim Bedira, Ali Mili, Ahmed Ferchichi, and finally, Abderrazak Graja and Ali Djerbi for their efforts and support.

PAPERS PRESENTED AT THE FORUM


REFERENCES


Journal of Knowledge Management, 1(1), i-v.


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